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SUBJECT: ITALIAN ELECTIONS: THE SOUTHERN BATTLEGROUND

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald P. Spogli, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) Puglia, on Italy's southern heel, is a battleground region in Italy's April 9 elections. Although a traditional stronghold of the Center Right, it is an area where voters have handed Center Left politicians dramatic electoral gains in recent municipal and regional voting. Local pundits believe the Center Right has run a good campaign, fielded strong candidates, and generally made an impressive comeback in Puglia this electoral season. But Puglia, like Italy as a whole, remains too close to call. As one analyst put it, "any small thing" in the campaign over the next few weeks could tip the balance. At issue is whether the Center Right can gain back enough of its traditional base to overcome profound voter dissatisfaction with the economy and a perception that PM Berlusconi failed to deliver on promises from the last national election. The Senate race, in particular, is wide open. FM Fini told one of his local party bosses that the campaign in Puglia could decide victory or defeat at the national level. End Summary.

Center Right: Puglia Could Be the Difference

12. (U) Italy's April 9 legislative elections look at this point like a statistical dead heat. The contest will likely be decided in just four of the country's 20 regions: Piedmont, Lazio, Puglia, and Friuli Venezia Giulia. All are areas where the Center Left has gained ground on the Center Right in local and regional elections in recent years. And nowhere is the battle tighter than in Puglia, ancient Apulia, the southeastern heel of Italy.

13. (C) Gianfranco Fini, Italy's foreign minister and the leader of the center-right's Alleanza Nazionale (AN) party, summed it up in no uncertain terms for his regional representative -- Adriana Poli Bortone, the veteran AN mayor of Lecce. "He put me in charge of the campaign here," she told us. "And he said Puglia could decide victory or defeat at the national level. That's a pretty heavy responsibility."

14. (SBU) Puglia, with the exception of the mountainous Gargano Peninsula in the north, is largely Adriatic coastal plain. Its 4 million inhabitants populate an area about 85 percent as big as New Jersey, stretching up the heel and lower back of Italy's boot. The capital is the port city of Bari; other cities are Brindisi, Foggia, Lecce, and Taranto. Agricultural activity includes olives, grapes, cereals, almonds, figs, tobacco, and livestock. There is fishing and manufacturing (refined petroleum, chemicals, cement, iron and steel, processed food, plastics, wine). Local authorities are keen to develop tourism. It has been a preferred point of entry for illegal immigrants from Albania. While organized crime exists, local politicians and magistrates maintain it is much less deeply entrenched than the Camorra in Naples, the N'Dragheta of Calabria, or the Mafia in Sicily.

15. (U) Some 3 million persons are eligible to vote in Puglia, and turnout is traditionally in excess of 70 percent, so roughly 2 million votes are in play. For many years a conservative, center-right stronghold, Puglia is a place that has been associated with traditional Catholic values. In recent years, however, it has also become a national emblem of center left political gains, with the left eclipsing the right in regional and local elections. The best known example came in 2005 elections for regional president, when a gay Communist candidate, Nichi Vendola, upset an incumbent from Prime Minister Berlusconi's Forza Italia party by just 14,000 votes.

Center Left: People Are Worse Off Than Five Years Ago

16. (SBU) To gauge the electoral climate in this pivotal region, Rome Pol M/C, Naples poloff, and Naples Pol FSN visited Bari and Lecce from February 28 to March 2, speaking to over a dozen political figures from both left and right, as well as journalists, magistrates, and local academics.

17. (SBU) The question on the minds of most people we met was

not whether the right had gained back ground on the left -- there was consensus they had -- but whether it would be enough to overcome profound voter dissatisfaction with the state of the economy and the failure of the Berlusconi government to fulfill its campaign promises of five years ago. There the analysis differed. Most believed the center-left still had an edge in the Chamber of Deputies vote, but the Senate race was definitely wide open. The center-right could well carry the Senate race in Puglia and -- as Fini indicated to the Lecce mayor -- that could be the margin for it to carry the upper house nationally.

18. (SBU) There was consensus that the biggest issue in Puglia was unemployment. Textile, clothing and footwear production has been severely hurt by cheap imports, especially from China. The best educated of the region's young are migrating in droves. Political leaders on both sides of the spectrum want the central government to invest more in public works and development of roads, ports, trains and airports -- to create jobs, lay the groundwork for economic development, and promote tourism.

Berlusconi Did Nothing He Said, Devolution Must Be Stopped

19. (C) "Berlusconi completely abandoned the Mezzogiorno (Italy's south) for five years," declared Michele Bordo, the 32-year-old regional secretary of the Democrats of the Left (DS), largest party in the center-left coalition. Center-left governments had spent more on the south. Berlusconi, he said, was seen as only thinking of himself, not the national interest. People were worse off than five years ago. The climate had changed. (A center-right senator in Bari, Salvatore Tatarella of Alleanza Nazionale (AN), privately acknowledged the campaign challenge created by a perception that "the government has done nothing it said it would do.")

110. (C) Another neuralgic issue in the south is devolution, a pet law of the separatist Northern League, supported by the Berlusconi government and passed recently by parliament. The DS secretary said the law should, and would, die when it goes to a national referendum later this year. He denounced the measure, especially its provisions for fiscal devolution, as a formula for keeping more money in the rich north and investing fewer national resources in the south.

Far Left: Employment is Job One

111. (C) The regional secretary of the Communist Renewal Party saw three priorities if the center left won: employment; reducing Italy's international involvement, especially in Iraq; and rolling back Berlusconi-era programs like devolution. Nicola Fratoianni, like Bordo in his early 30s, greeted us in jeans and jacket at an office plastered with anti-war posters. "We disagree with your government's policies in Iraq," he said, noting that his party was "not very satisfied" with what it saw as hedged wording in the center-left program on the need to coordinate any withdrawal from Iraq.

112. (C) But Fratoianni said the party's top priority was addressing the "precariousness" of work for many people. Contracts should be reworked to provide more job security for workers; if more flexibility were required for certain jobs, that was fine, but people should be paid more. "Some people believed Berlusconi's promises five years ago," he said. "Now he's doing it again, making more promises. But the people who believed him before are disillusioned."

Center Right Working the Message

113. (C) We asked Lecce mayor Poli Bartone of AN about the left's accusation that the Berlusconi government had abandoned the region during the last five years. She responded that, in fact, a lot of money has come to the area, mainly EU funds. The difficulty was that at first, much of the money obligated went unused for lack of implementing projects. Now, she said, "we are much better at this" and 98 percent of the available money is being used, and well -- to restore public buildings, improve internal transport, and provide better lighting in rundown, crime-prone urban peripheral areas. But, Poli Bartone said, "this is a campaign challenge for me -- to make people understand that, if EU money is coming in, it's because this government obtained it."

114. (C) The editors of the Bari edition of leftist La Repubblica said the Puglia campaign was very close. Chief editor Stefano Constantini flatly declared that the Center Left had not been campaigning well. "We are a journal of the

left," he said. "We want to help. We asked them to give us five points -- just five -- to summarize their 281-page program, and we got no response." Constantini believed the Center Right had recovered ground strongly. His colleague, editor and political analyst Domenico Castellaneta, went even further. Castellaneta thought the center right would win the Senate in Puglia. (Subsequently, the Berlusconi-owned daily Il Giornale reported March 10 a local La Repubblica poll had shown the Center Right at 48.5 percent in the Puglia Senate race, against 47 percent for the Center Left coalition.)

15. (C) Prof. Mario Lo Presti, the head of the Eurispes Institute for Political, Economic, and Social Studies in Puglia, said the campaign was simply too close to call. As a statistician, he cautioned, "I don't believe in polls -- they are only valid for the moment they are conducted. The next day they are no good." Lo Presti saw the race in Puglia as so close that "any small thing" in the campaign over the next few weeks could tip the balance.

Wild Cards: New Law, Turnout, Cussedness

16. (C) Wild cards in the Puglia race are the impact of the new electoral law, turnout, and the cussedness factor. The new law requires voting for parties, not individuals. This worries southern politicians, for whom personal affiliation and connections have been the traditional determinants of political loyalty. Now, politicians on both sides must scramble to educate voters. Luigi Pepe of Lecce, regional secretary for centrist UDEUR, has prepared special inserts

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for newspapers in his district -- explaining to his constituents that they vote for him by marking a ballot next to the party symbol for UDEUR, but without his name next to it. The task for Pepe and others is further complicated because writing in a name next to the party symbol will annul the ballot.

17. (C) So Pepe believes confusion over the new rules could depress turnout. Similarly, Poli Bartone of AN said that, under the new system, it would be a challenge to reach the nearly 74 percent turnout of five years ago. The La Repubblica editors in Bari thought the difficulty of motivating voters when their preferred candidates' names are not actually on the ballot could cut more against the Center Left. They commented that AN had also done a good job of fielding strong candidates in Puglia.

"Berlusconi Record a Problem, but Prodi Objectively Worse"

18. (C) Rep. Giannicola Sinisi of the moderate left Daisy Party disagreed. He noted that the center left, as a result of its victory in local elections, would now enjoy in Puglia the advantage the right had had five years ago -- the power of incumbency. He said this was a particular boost in the south, with its tradition of clientelism and "transformismo", i.e., changing one's party to go with the presumed winners. Senator Salvatore Tatarella of AN acknowledged that incumbency had indeed been a plus under the old system, but said it was less so now. The right had been in power for many years in Puglia, and had a firm base at the regional level. While the coalition had made a number of "tactical errors" in the recent campaign for regional president, those had now been addressed. Besides, he said, the Berlusconi record may be a problem, but "Prodi is objectively worse."

19. (C) Then there is the cussedness factor. We noted to the Eurispes head that people everywhere tend to vote for change when things aren't going well. How might that play in Puglia, if people were feeling worse off? Prof. Lo Presti said the throw-the-bums-out factor might be good news for the Center Left on a national level, but it could be negative for the left in Puglia, where they control many local administrations. The newspaper editors concurred. Vendola, the gay Communist regional president, was actually doing quite well, but he had been in power less than a year, not enough time to have much impact. By contrast, others like the mayor of Bari, who have been in government longer, were having more difficulty.

Comment

20. (C) Both coalitions see Puglia as central to their winning formulas. Party leaders on both sides will likely make a major effort there in the closing weeks of the campaign. The Center Left is betting on people feeling worse off than five years ago and disillusioned with Berlusconi's unkept promises. But they've done a poor job capitalizing on this discontent. The Center Right has revamped its

organization in a traditional stronghold, campaigned well, and fielded good local candidates. But voters are unimpressed by Berlusconi's domestic record and leery of new promises. In short, Puglia, like Italy as a whole, is too close to call. As Lo Presti of Eurispes said, "any small thing" in the campaign over the next few weeks could tip the balance. And it could well be that, as Puglia goes, so goes the nation.

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